

**Violence:** Let me begin this discussion by joining in the mixture of sorrow, disgust and anguish that is universally felt by all Americans at the recent spate of killings resulting in the deaths of children and students in schools and colleges around the country. The Sandy Hook Elementary school tragedy is one that will not, and should not, leave our collective memories for many years. My daily prayers include the families of these young victims. There is no disagreement that such violence is on the increase in our country. There is similarly no dispute that we must have a reasoned and serious debate about its causes and potential solutions.

With this writing, I will enter that debate.

With a few exceptions, the proposals to reduce such violence have been focused on increased gun control legislation. Some have also talked about increased mental health funding and reporting, while others have suggested armed guards in schools as a solution. I believe that these proposals all deal with the symptoms rather than the causes of such violence.

Furthermore, I believe that most of these proposals are actually counterproductive in that they distract us from what perhaps are much more difficult and deep-seated issues that we are fearful of or simply unwilling to address.

Fifty years ago, there were far fewer gun controls than exist today. Increasingly restrictive gun control legislation has been passed at all levels of government in a continual manner over the last 50 years. But, unfortunately, as gun control has increased, so has gun violence. These sorts of killings did not occur nearly to the degree they do now in the 50s or 60s, when gun control legislation was just beginning to be enacted. Now, I am not going to make the argument that more gun control leads to more gun violence. Many will make this argument legitimately by pointing out that gun control disarms law-abiding citizens while those who desire to commit murder (which is, by the way, illegal) are not bothered by breaking gun laws to do so. Thereby, the lawless can be more reckless knowing that the lawful will be unarmed. This argument has standing and certainly the statistics support this conclusion. But, as I said, I will leave that argument for others to make.

So, there is no record of gun control in this country resulting in less gun violence. As far as the other commonly mentioned "solutions" to this growing problem, mental health restrictions have their own issues - which I won't get into in detail here. And, if we are going to have armed guards in all schools, why stop there? What about movie theaters? Or shopping centers? Or any other place where a number of people gather? A society where we have a policeman on every block is not a society that any of us should want to approach.

In the humble view of this writer, the real problem here is that there is something societal going on. Something that may not have anything to do with laws at all, but with changes in our culture over the last 50 years that have made horrific acts of violence a more commonplace and more acceptable behavior than was ever before the case. Moreover, these acts appear to be more justifiable in the minds of those perpetrating the violence. Mass killers or want-to-be killers are unhappy people who are mad at the world and/or blame specific individuals for their lot in life. This is not new. What is new, however, is that societal norms which in the past would have restrained such an extreme level of reactive behavior seem to no longer exist. What has caused this?

I don't think there is any one cause. Far from it, actually. Instead, I think this behavioral shift is a result of an interconnected web of conditions in society that have changed, and are still changing, how we view the world around us and how we react to it. Now, I am no social scientist. I must admit that I enter this discussion with a fair amount of trepidation. But, the topic is too important to just stand on the sidelines. Therefore, I will offer up six conditions that I believe have changed during my lifetime in the culture of America that are directly contributing to the violence we are witnessing:

- **The "Me" Society:** I grew up in Los Angeles. The freeways were jammed even when I got my drivers' license, but road rage was rare. Today, it is uncommon to not witness road rage on my drive to work. Why? I suggest that this is part of the "me" society and the "me" generation. "My" time is more valuable than anyone else's time. People cut off someone driving a little slower than they with an indignant attitude of, "How dare that person interfere with my valuable mission, which is clearly more important than his or hers?!" Achieving "my" wants is a goal that should not be interrupted by the lesser wants of others. These days, it seems, it is all about "me". If it's all about "me", clearly the person next to me doesn't matter.

- **The Irresponsible Society:** Nothing that goes wrong is our own fault any more. It may be the fault of a teacher, a parent, or maybe an ex-girl or boyfriend. The ads on TV tell me that it's the fault of my employer, or the people who made my soft drink, or someone who assembled my car without a warning. One thing's for sure, it's not "my fault"!! Phil Mickelson was lucky! Steve Jobs "didn't build that", someone else did it and he was just lucky enough to get the credit. I could have been the world's best golfer or have had all kinds of success if "the man" (whoever you believe "the man" to be) hadn't kept me down. Others get success by luck and my failures are their fault. This is increasingly the thinking of a society that continues to diminish the concept of personal responsibility. With this comes the desire for revenge against whomever I deem to have caused my problems - since it clearly wasn't me.

- **The Secular Society:** Regular attendance of church or synagogue has declined in recent decades. Fewer people consider themselves religious. We have removed God from our schools and, increasingly, from all institutions of government. This society based on Judeo-Christian values is becoming less Judeo-Christian. The values, principles and standards of behavior in the Bible can never be replaced by a social studies textbook. Has removing God from so much of our lives today created a nurturing environment for evil to take root?

- **The Non-Family Society:** The much maligned "nuclear family" was not so bad a thing after all. But, whether your family is "nuclear" or otherwise structured, the centrality of the family unit to modern culture has been undoubtedly diminished. Family units are much more likely to break up than ever before with the end result of leaving many people adrift. A village cannot fully replace the emotional support of a family and neither can friends. We should place more value on the family unit and on keeping it together.

- **The "Just Win Baby" Society:** Play harder! Be tougher! Win at all costs! Really? At all costs? Is that what we are about now? The end justifies the means? In the financial world, it seems many play by these rules. But, this mindset is not unique to that world. If it's OK to climb the ladder by stepping on the dreams of others, what else is OK?

- **The Violence Society:** Hollywood, and other purveyors of entertainment, have a profit motive. As such, I often think they do not lead society, but try to reflect it. But, there is no doubt that they have an influence. There is no doubt that the characteristics of TV, movies and song lyrics have changed over the decades. There is much more celebrated and gratuitous violence. In response to the question, "Why does anyone need a gun like that?", I recently heard someone say, "Well, why does anyone need a Quentin Tarantino movie?". Good point.

Of course, I am far from a saint. I have grown up in and through these societal changes and have not been unaffected by them. I've made some impolite moves on the road because I thought my time was more important than that of another driver. I've watched and enjoyed some violent movies, and I skipped church for a good decade while I questioned my own faith in a God I could not see. The point of my writing this is not to serve me up as any kind of example. It is to make us all question what we each are doing to contribute to the degradation of our society. And, even more importantly, what can each of us do to fix it?

I'm sure this hasn't been easy for many of you to read. It has not been easy for me to write. But, I am tired of watching our society get angrier and more dependent and more divided and self-serving. And, I'm sick of the political class blaming it all on a simple device that has existed for centuries.

There are no laws we can or should pass to deal with these societal problems. But, we need to have the discussion. We need leadership from a lot more places than Washington in order to deeply examine ourselves and the society we are creating. I am not suggesting that we try to go back to anything. You cannot "go back" nor should you as there are plenty of elements of society 50 years ago to which we do not want to return. But, we should be building a society around respect, personal responsibility, family, faith, and compassion. Indeed, we should begin to start paying attention to how we treat others. Not just how we treat some people. How we treat everyone. I'm not sure we've been doing that over the last few decades. In my view, the confluence of the six societal characteristics that I described above lead to a lot of angry people making rude gestures or using bad words. But, without question, for a few people, this anger drives them to pick up a weapon and use it.

I didn't write this missive to propose legislation. I didn't write it to criticize or slam one "side" or another. And, I refuse to add to the divisive political rhetoric with which you are already being inundated. I wrote it because I'm struggling with this question, too. I wrote it to force myself to think a little deeper, to encourage some difficult self-examination, and to bring about some changes in my own behavior. But, I also wrote it to make you think a little, too. Not just about your opinion, but also about what you might do differently. How you might act differently. If it has made you a little uncomfortable, then maybe I've been successful. As we seek to find and solve the root causes of these tragedies, I am convinced that the true remedies will not come from the top down. We must all engage in this difficult conversation together. I need to hear your thoughts, your ideas, your responses to my questions, and, ultimately, an honest assessment of your own self-examination. There is no quick-fix solution to this terribly complex issue, but I guarantee you that there are answers out there if we have the patience and determination to find them.

None of us ever want to again see the faces of tiny children cut down by a maniac. But, the way to prevent these tragedies will not be as simple as passing new legislation. Let us have the courage to confront the much more difficult, but much more substantive problems in society together. May God bless us that quest as He has long blessed this country.